

# International media coverage and changing societies: The view from Canada

Haroon Siddiqui

What constitutes full and fair coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian issue? It goes without saying that the question can never fully be answered in a democracy. And it cannot be answered without context. There two relevant contexts: One has to do with the structure of the media and the second with the post-Cold War and post-September 11 geopolitics of the United States. After exploring these and related issues, the author offers several ethical points for journalists and the media.

To begin with, some statements of the obvious about the media. Media are a business. But media are more than the business of manufacturing widgets. Being in the business of news and opinion, they play a crucial role in a democracy. Indeed, they proclaim just such a role but tend to be cagey when it comes to fulfilling their concomitant responsibilities.

In Canada, there are at least Press Councils (not government bodies, but voluntary associations of member-newspapers), which adjudicate reader complaints and members are obligated to publish the findings in a prominent spot. But given the different traditions in the United States -- all the arguments surrounding the fourth Amendment - readers and customers are, by and large, at the mercy of the media.

As a business, media must make money. They do so delivering audiences to advertisers. It is human that some advertisers would be tempted to penalize the medium that may bite the hand that feeds it. The bigger and more economically stable the medium, the more likely it is to resist such pressures and be editorially independent, if it is so inclined, i.e. if its owner is so inclined.

Being a business, media are not in the business of offending clients to the point of driving them away. So they go with the flow. Too many cater to the lowest common denominator. Only some aim for the highest common factor. Very few lead, and take the risk of telling the truth the public, or to powerful people and lobbies who may not want to hear the truth.

The notion of journalistic objectivity has been oversold. Journalism is subjective, hopefully practiced fairly, based on news value. There are guidelines on what constitutes news. But news

judgments reflect the biases of the editors, who reflect the biases of the owners.

### Monopolisation and pluralism

None of this is new. What is new are the four C's of journalism: increasing corporatisation of media; increasing concentration of ownership; increasing convergence of media; and, in the case of ideological owners, creeping censorship. Monopolies in the media are worse than monopolies in other industries.

Something else is new: Our demography is changing dramatically. Both sides of almost every international issue are present in Canada and the United States: Serbs and Kosovars, Serbs and Bosnians, Serbs and Croats; Greeks and Macedonians, Greeks and Turks; Kurds and Turks; Sikhs and Hindus; Indians and Pakistanis; Chinese and Taiwanese; Arabs and Jews. The list is long.

But the media are slow to catch up. They rarely portray the extraordinary pluralism of their societies. They are also peddling outdated narratives, domestically and internationally, at a time when the domestic and international have never been more fused than in today's global village.

Even the domestic factions of many of the world's most divided societies find an echo here: Sri Lankan Tamils and Sinhalese; the supporters and opponents of Islamic Iran; and of India's Hindu nationalist government; and the whole range of the political spectrum of Israeli politics.

Beyond these pockets of particular interests, there is a growing constituency keen on international issues. Yet such an informed and involved citizenry rarely gets the in-depth foreign news coverage and variety in opinion and analysis that it deserves. What it often gets instead is reportage of breathtaking shallowness, and limited commentaries. Outside of a handful of newspapers, what audiences have been given since Sept. 11 is not journalism but American jingoism.

Add to this the context of post-Cold War America, the rhetoric of 'clash of civilizations' and the identifying of Islam as the new enemy of America, more precisely, militant Islam, loosely defined as anyone that does not agree with American hegemony or opposes Israel. Add September 11 - 19 hijackers, all Arabs and all Muslim - and you have the full backdrop against which to judge media coverage of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

George Bush said the war on terrorism was not a war on Muslims and certainly not a war on Islam. But most of the American media seem not to have heard it. Muslims and Arabs have been relentlessly demonised. They are tarred with the broad brush of group guilt for the evil deeds of some. The Canadian Race Relations Foundation printed bumper stickers that read, 'Terrorists come in all colours - and religions'. But in the media, it has been perfectly acceptable to talk about Islamic terrorism, as opposed to Christian terrorism or Jewish terrorism or Hindu terrorism, just as it was earlier acceptable to magnify the holy terror of an Islamic bomb as opposed to the presumably benign Christian bomb, or a Jewish bomb, or a Hindu bomb.

#### Short historical memories

Media are apt to argue that more Muslims go off on Jihads than others. But if history is any guide, Christians killed more Muslims and Jews in the name of religion than the other way around. Then there is the discourse on Islamic suicide bombers. Lest we forget, the first Palestinian suicide missions were mounted by the godless, Marxist Front for the Liberation of Palestine, headed by George Habash. When the Hezbollah suicide bombers emerged in Lebanon, the media attributed the phenomenon to the peculiarities of the minority Shi'ite concept and complex of martyrdom. Since Sept. 11 here and more recently in the occupied territories, the vile practice is now blamed on Islam itself.

Yet the same practice used by the Tamil Tigers was, and is, never attributed to Hinduism, even though Tamil Tigers have carried out by far the most suicide terror acts, about 230 vs. about 75 by Muslims, according to the Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence, at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland.

Nor was the general terrorism of the IRA on behalf of their co-religionists ever blamed on Catholicism itself.

So, we do have a special problem here. In an earlier era, we had to battle anti-Catholicism and anti-Semitism in society and the media, and, in some ways, still must. The societal and media challenge of this age is to battle anti-Islamism and anti-Arabism, which is the latest unacceptable face of racism. There is no other way to say it.

#### Strategic interests

I want to turn to the domestic implications of this American media mindset, which has a direct

bearing on the topic at hand. There has been relentless pressure, overt and subtle, on American Muslims and Arabs to condemn Sept. 11 terrorists, which they all have. Almost every religious authority in the world, plus all of the Muslim and Arab groups and organizations in North America, have done so repeatedly and without reservation.

Yet this does not seem to be enough. They are still asked to 'take responsibility for Sept. 11' and 'own up to it'. This is nonsense. Ordinary law-abiding Muslims and Arabs are no more responsible for Sept. 11 than Japanese-Americans were for Pearl Harbour, or German-Americans were for the Nazis. Law-abiding Muslims and Arabs are, obviously, as keen as any other citizens that terrorists be ferreted out and punished. In fact, the sooner this is done, the more their civil liberties will be protected.

Muslims and Arabs are also accused of having few 'moderates'. Moderates are then defined as those who not only condemn terrorism, which almost all do, but who 1) can confirm prevailing prejudices against Islam and Arabs, and 2) can also exonerate American foreign policy, which few can. Failure to do so is offered as proof that Muslims are crawling with militants. This is a media game that Muslims and Arabs cannot win.

Similar distortions dominate the debate on democracy in the Muslim world, especially the Middle East. Muslims are justifiably berated for the absence of it. But in the next breath, they are told that they cannot be trusted with it - like colonials telling the natives they were not ready for independence.

In its strategic interest to protect oil supplies, America sustains oppressive military or monarchical regimes, not unlike what Washington used to do in Latin America. The policy has failed spectacularly. In Iran, it produced a revolution. In Algeria, it produced a brutal civil war. In Saudi Arabia and Egypt, it produced the Sept. 11 hijackers.

Yet intellectual sophistry has it that Muslims may use democracy to get power only to kill democracy. Some might. But where tried, democracy has proven the dictum that power tames. Post-revolutionary Iran, for all its faults, is arguably the most democratic Muslim nation. It certainly has produced an elected class of moderates who are leading the intellectual debate on democracy in the Muslim world.

Jordan, where the late King Hussein co-opted the Palestinians into the parliamentary process, has a peace treaty with Israel and has developed a less militant society. Egypt also has a similar peace treaty, but is one of the most oppressive regimes, and bristles with militancy. Yet we rarely hear these perspectives in the media.

This, then, is the backdrop to media coverage of the Arab-Israeli conflict, especially the latest round of hostilities. It proved the perfect backdrop for the American neo-conservative and Israeli hard-right agenda for piggybacking on the anti-terrorism war to quash Palestinian resistance, and derail the Oslo peace process, which they never really did like.

#### Distinctions and dilemmas

Media coverage of the Middle East was never a level-playing field, but the field got tilted ever more in recent months. There is obviously no excuse for brutal, savage, inexcusable Palestinian terror. But the fact also is that innocents have died on both sides, including women and children, thrice as many on the Palestinian side. Or, is it that Palestinian lives are worth less?

Most in the American media have fallen into the trap of defaming the entire Palestinian struggle as terrorist. And they've lost the distinction between a commitment to Israel and a commitment to the Sharon government.

One fully understands the dilemma of Jewish Americans and Jewish Canadians who feel duty-bound to stand by Israel, even while totally disagreeing with Sharon's policies and tactics. But the failure of the media to navigate that distinction is more regrettable. Even the range of opinion within the Jewish community here is rarely reflected in the media. One gets a well-balanced presentation of this very democratic range of views from the Israeli media, but not in the North American media. I rarely read here about B'Tselem or other brave human rights and women's organizations.

Anti-Israeli demonstrations here are rarely covered or covered adequately. Opinion pages are replete with columnists whose only view is that right or wrong, Israel is right. When a so-called Muslim or Arab opinion is solicited, it is generally sought from those who can confirm prevailing prejudice, such as Salman Rushdie and Fouad Ajami. Neither is reflective of either Muslim or Arab opinion. In fact, quite the contrary. They are obviously entitled to their opinions, but they are not representative of Arab or Muslim opinion. So the eagerness with which they are sought tells us more about the media than them.

If one follows the news coverage, as well as commentary, presented in American mainstream media, both in print and electronically, one would assume the presence of a monolithic, uniform view of the Arab-Israeli conflict. But this is not so. America is rich with a range of views, pro-Sharon, anti-Sharon, pro-Israeli and anti-Israeli, pro-Arafat and anti-Arafat. But these are rarely reflected in the media.

There is a growing body of opinion in America that American mainstream media are out of sync with their customers. The media face a growing credibility crisis, especially with the only growing segment of the market, which is immigrant and urban.

To try to remedy this situation, I should like to submit the following ethical points for consideration by journalists and the media:

¶ Ignore the propaganda of either side and tell the truth. You are not a partisan for either.

¶ Apply the principle of sanctity of human life equally to both sides.

¶ Record the human rights violations of both sides.

¶ Beware of anti-Arabism and anti-Islamism as much as anti-Semitism.

¶ Avoid group guilt. Do not tar all Arabs and Muslims with the brush of terrorism.

¶ Beware that a growing number of Americans feel that they are being shut out of news coverage and the business of opinion-making.

¶ Balance the commentary and opinion sections of newspapers and/or segments on radio and TV with a wide range of views. Too many of your columnists and regular contributors sing the same tune.

¶ Open up the Letters to the Editor sections and have a more open, honest, free, and democratic debate.

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